



The President's Daily Brief

March 25, 1975

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

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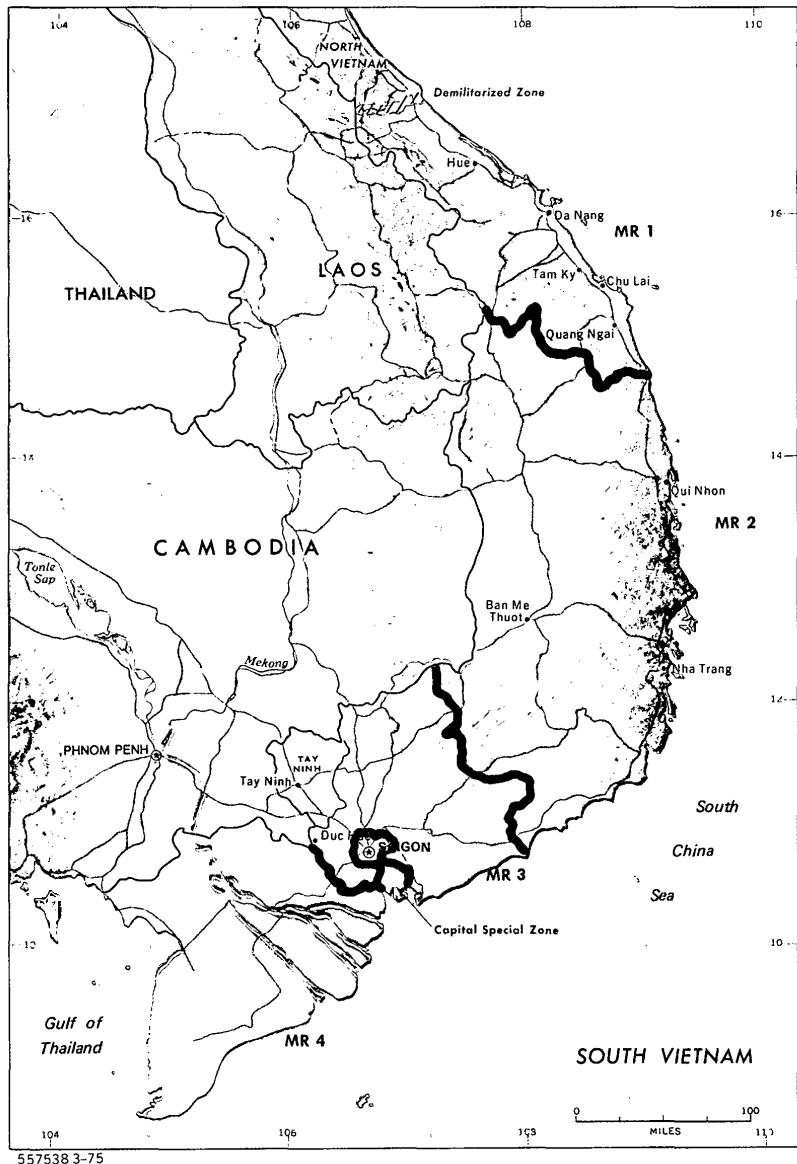
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SOUTH VIETNAM

The military situation in the northern provinces continues to deteriorate rapidly, and the government's ability to make a strong defense at Da Nang appears increasingly questionable. This morning, the US embassy in Saigon ordered the evacuation of some American personnel from the city. Three of the government's infantry divisions are trying to fight their way out of communist traps to reach Da Nang.

The 1st Division is moving from Hue, while the 2nd and 3rd divisions are battling toward the airfield at Chu Lai from the cities of Tam Ky and Quang Ngai, respectively. Many of these divisions' units have taken heavy casualties and others are reported in a serious state of disarray.

The principal government unit now guarding Da Nang is the marine division. There are reliable indications that President Thieu may shortly order its withdrawal to shore up government defenses along the central coast. If the marine division is removed, the defense of Da Nang probably will collapse.

An equally serious problem confronting the city is the large number of refugees. The latest government estimates place the number at close to a million; thousands more jam the roadways from all directions. Centers have been set up in the open in Da Nang to try to cope with minimum needs. Plans are being made to evacuate as many refugees as possible to points farther south to relieve the burden they impose on the defense of Da Nang.

In the central provinces, government forces must regroup if they are to protect coastal cities, such as Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. The South Vietnamese are trying to break communist roadblocks that are preventing remnants of government forces from reaching the coast. The heaviest fighting continues to be concentrated south of Tay Ninh City, where control of the major highways is being contested. The fighting has resulted in heavy casualties on both sides. Some senior officers in Saigon now appear to have serious doubts about an all-out stand in Tay Ninh Province.

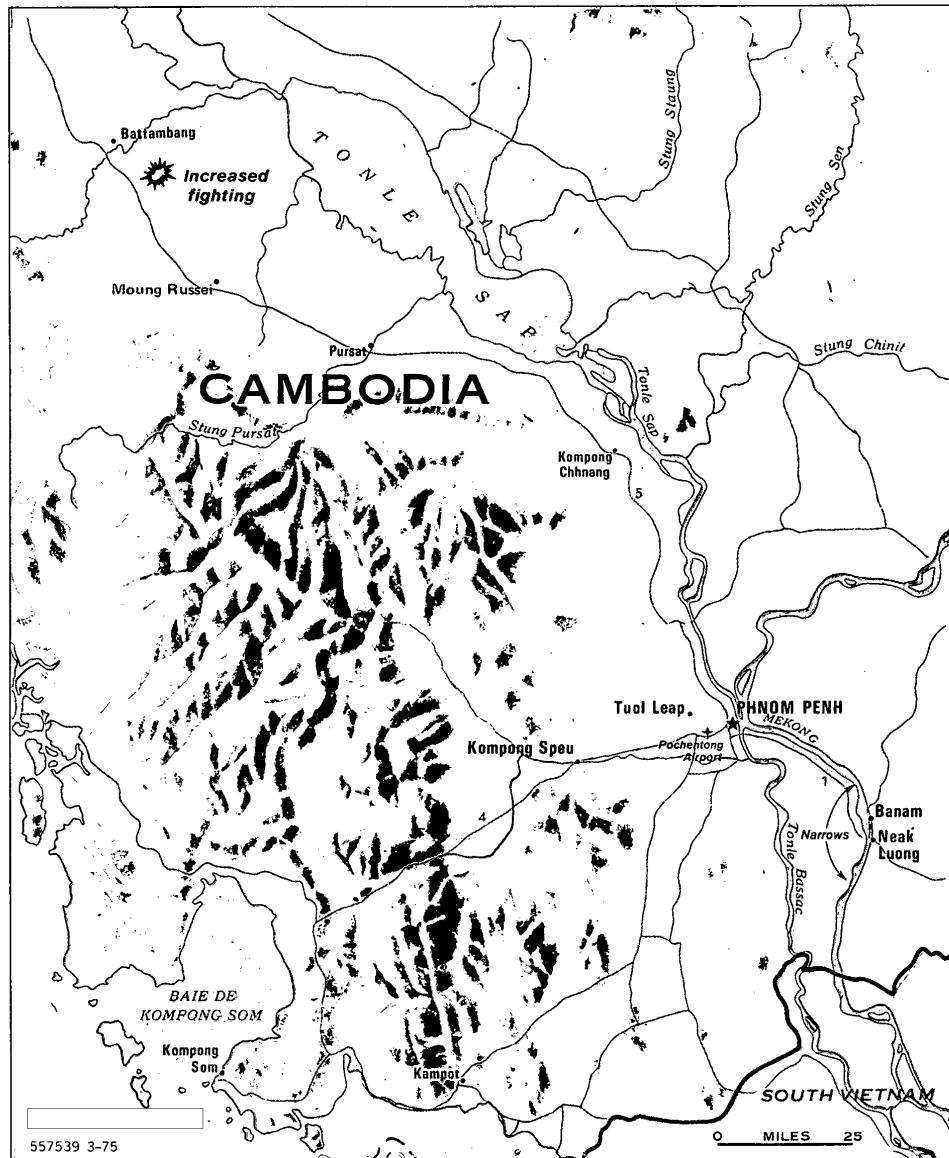
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Yesterday, Saigon itself was put on more of a war footing. With the re-establishment of the Capital Military District, its new commander, General Nguyen Van Minh, controls a 15-mile circle of defenses around the capital. Minh is a better commander of ground forces than was his predecessor, a navy vice admiral.

The lack of clear orders from Saigon reportedly is affecting government forces and causing unnecessary losses of territory. Military leaders in the delta provinces are expressing anxiety about which areas President Thieu may consider expendable. One commander claimed that the recent fall of Duc Hue District, to the west of Saigon, was a direct result of uncertainty about whether the district would eventually be declared expendable; some troops refused to fight.



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CAMBODIA

The US airlift into Phnom Penh's Pochehtong Airport continued without interruption yesterday. Rockets again fell near military facilities on the southeastern side of the airfield, where most airlift cargo is unloaded.

The rocket attacks are not likely to end soon. Government units near the "rocket belt" continue to mark time while parts of the task force try to regain positions south of Tuol Leap that were lost over the weekend. Other nearby communist units have increased attacks near Route 4, and the highway remains closed between Phnom Penh and the provincial capital of Kompong Speu.

Analysis of recent intercepts indicates that the communists have committed all their reserves north and west of the capital to battlefronts in these areas.

Government defenders at Banam and Neak Luong held their ground yesterday. In the far northwest, however, insurgent forces are edging closer to Battambang City, and local government commanders are bracing for possible attacks against the city and the nearby air force base.

* * *

The Japanese government has decided not to extend a formal invitation to Cambodian President Lon Nol to visit Japan, so Lon Nol's departure from Phnom Penh may consequently be delayed. Prime Minister Long Boret told Ambassador Dean over the weekend that Tokyo--citing "security problems" and possible adverse domestic press reaction--had vetoed the offer of a formal invitation made by the Japanese ambassador in Phnom Penh last week. As of Saturday, Boret had not yet informed Lon Nol of the Japanese refusal and was apparently still trying to work out some arrangement to allow for Lon Nol's "honorable departure."

Lon Nol has gone so far as to sign a statement of his willingness to leave and to ask that funds be set aside for his use while abroad. He appears sold on the idea of visiting some Asian country. Boret claims that he "vaguely" raised the possibility of Lon Nol's going to Hawaii for medical treatment, but that the President did not appear interested. In relating these latest developments to Ambassador Dean, Boret stressed the need to arrange a graceful exit for Lon Nol.

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MIDDLE EAST

The future of US-Israeli relations appears to be Tel Aviv's principal pre-occupation at the moment. [redacted]

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[redacted] *the government's first task is to ensure that relations with Washington remain satisfactory.*

The Israeli press reports that Tel Aviv will launch a major campaign in the US to explain its position to the American public. It speculates that Prime Minister Rabin or Foreign Minister Alon will ask to visit Washington to "clarify questions that might harm US-Israeli relations." Israel's ambassador to Washington cut short his stay in Tel Aviv and flew to New York yesterday to brief hurriedly assembled American Jewish leaders and reportedly to enlist their help in the information campaign.

Rabin told a special session of the Knesset yesterday that cooperation with Washington remains a cornerstone of Israeli foreign policy, but added that Israel must "clarify" its position on the negotiations with Egypt. The Knesset, by a vote of 92 to 4, passed a resolution blaming Egypt for the "suspension" of the talks.

In Cairo yesterday, Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmi reiterated at the opening session of the Arab League foreign ministers' meeting that Israeli "arrogance" was to blame. He called for a concerted Arab effort to isolate Israel in the world community "like South Africa and Rhodesia."

In an initial Syrian reaction, Damascus radio, citing "official quarters," yesterday said that the convening of the Geneva conference as soon as possible is now the only alternative.

Soviet media reaction has been sparse and low-key. Pravda yesterday merely replayed excerpts of official US and Egyptian statements. Moscow's reticence probably indicates the Soviets have not

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yet sorted out the latest developments. A commentary in Arabic broadcast by Radio Moscow alleged, "The time spent in seeking partial solutions was lost." It added that the US has the "necessary driving forces," by stopping "trans-Atlantic assistance," to keep Israel from making "unacceptable demands." The commentary endorsed quickly reconvening the Geneva conference, maintaining that it "is capable of" achieving a solution. This idea was also included yesterday in the communiqué marking the end of French Prime Minister Chirac's visit to the USSR.

Egyptian and Israeli, and perhaps Syrian, armed forces remain on alert.

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USSR

The submarine salvage story was mentioned briefly last Friday by a member of the Soviet SALT delegation in Geneva to support Moscow's current negotiating position that the US is underestimating its technical intelligence capabilities.

In conversation with an American official, the Soviet delegate said that the reported ability of the US to locate a Soviet submarine at such depth and distance from the coast indicates the potential capability of "national technical means of verification."

The complete text of the conversation is not yet available, but it is evident that the Soviet's reference to the submarine recovery operation was made in a relaxed fashion. Given the specialized context in which his remarks were made, we doubt that they reflect any detailed guidance from Moscow. The fact that the subject was raised at all indicates there is no blanket prohibition on the Soviet side against discussing it.

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ITALY

The Italian Communist Party is on the defensive because of its failure to condemn the events in Portugal that led to the banning of the Portuguese Christian Democratic Party.

The Italian Communist Party had hoped that the conciliatory tone of its recently concluded national congress would undercut arguments of the Christian Democratic Party against Communist participation in the government. Communist Party leader Berlinguer emphasized at the congress that only a government coalition including the Communists would have the "force and authority" to deal with Italy's problems. He asserted that if included in the government, the Communists would not "bring up" the subject of Italian withdrawal from NATO.

The party's failure to criticize the role of the Communists in Portugal, however, has given the Christian Democrats a reason for refusing any concessions to the Italian Communists. The Christian Democrats are preparing to use the issue to test the claim of the Italian Communists to be an independent national party when local elections are held throughout the country in June.

During closing sessions of the Communists' congress, speakers seemed to be moving cautiously toward a more critical line about the Portuguese Communists. Berlinguer may yet decide to assume a posture of outright criticism.

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NOTE

The Sino-Soviet border negotiations evidently have made no progress since the return of chief Soviet negotiator Illichev to Peking in mid-February.

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[redacted]
the major obstacle to progress continues to be the Chinese demand that the USSR remove its forces from those areas designated as disputed by Peking and from areas contiguous to the disputed regions. Moscow has consistently rejected this precondition to formal negotiations, regarding it, in Brezhnev's words, as "absolutely unacceptable." Moscow evidently sees no possibilities for progress in the talks until this condition is removed, or at least drastically modified. The talks, in the meantime, are continuing on a twice-weekly basis with discussions focusing on minor points of contention.

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